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WORK SPECIAL

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Selling deserted shophouses to private individuals seems to be one of the ways to revitalize Rotterdam's neglected neighbourhoods. Traditionally a shophouse contains three-four small apartments, each occupying an entire floor, yet, aiming to attract better-grounded public, the municipality sells entire buildings under the condition that the new owners will restore them within a specified period of time, merging several apartments into a single residence. In other words, the city opts for a strategy that is opposite to the common trend of many inner cities where larger houses are divided into several apartments.

Located in the southern part of Rotterdam, the Black Pearl co-designed by Studio Rolf fr and Zecc Architects is one such example. A shophouse that remained empty for nearly 30 years was not merely revamped but turned into an architectural spectacle, a design experiment with time and space. Its century-old masonry, frames and windowpanes are entirely covered with shiny black oil. This puts a symbolic shadow over the historic facade, while a new and very different way of living is broadcasted to the outer world by a set of irregularly placed square windows. Inside, traces of the past are also kept visible. Old banister along the wall and holes left by the removed floor joists reveal the original layout, which has been completely reversed in the dwelling's current reincarnation.

The existing building becomes an empty box filled with new contents; all walls and floors were demolished to create a unified 5m-wide, 10m-long and 11m-high space. Living spaces are connected by voids, large stairwells and long sightlines. All redundant banisters, railing and doors are left out, causing a high degree of spatial abstraction. Floors, walls, stairs and ceilings blend in an almost Escher-like impossibility, yet the shophouse is perfectly liveable. Three different «worlds» are stacked inside the «box»: the workshop, the house and the roof garden. The ground floor hosts a 5m-high workshop, connected with a «roof files-and-bamboo garden». With most of the facilities lined up along the walls, in one continuous element, the workshop is seen as a maximally open space. The next «world» is a 6m-high





living area organized by and around a huge sculptural element: its role is to divide the space into several zones without creating closed rooms. Mostly suspended from the roof beams and therefore requiring no serious support from below, the feature is entirely composed of small wooden slats, forming both structure and finish — a construction method that allows for a greater freedom of form. The «sculpture» is shaped such that it allows a series of views that emphasize the entire length, width and height of the place. And, finally, there is the topmost «world»: the roof. Having removed the old roof tiles — only to re-use them in the backyard garden — the architects built a greenhouse with a bathtub and an impressive view.

The colour palette — black, white and three greys is yet another important ingredient. The original parts of the interior — the sidewall and the traces of the original construction, including the old railing and pipes, are painted white. The other wall is left untreated, while the facets of the newly designed sculptural object are painted in three different shades of grey, depending on the space they enclose — a subtle touch that helps create spatial unity between the object and the existing «box».